

Coinciding Sisyphean Condition with Expatriation: Exploring the Existential Crisis of Gogol in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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*“What is the reason you wish to change your name, Mr. Ganguli?”
the judge asks ... he takes a deep breath and tells the people in the
courtroom what he has never dared to admit to his parents. “I hate
the name Gogol,” he says “I have always hated it.”
(The Namesake 101-102).*

The Indian American author Jhumpa Lahiri, the winner of Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, in her second work, *The Namesake* places a great deal of association with the protagonist, Gogol. She was born in London to the Bengali Indian immigrant parents. Her family moved to the United States when she was three. Although Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage, Lahiri considered herself an American. When she began kindergarten in Kingston, Rhode Island, Lahiri's teacher decided to call her by her pet name, Jhumpa because it was easier to pronounce than her proper name, Nilanjana Sudeshna. Lahiri in Books: Inspiring Adaptation recalled, “I always felt so embarrassed by my name... You feel like you're causing someone pain just by being who you are.” Lahiri's ambivalence over her identity led to conceiving the character of Gogol, the protagonist of her novel, *The Namesake* who was equally ambiguous over his unusual name. Moreover Gogol and Lahiri share similar traits as both are accustomed to being stranded in between their inherited culture and adopted one.

The story of *The Namesake* depicts the life of the Ganguli family living in the suburban America. The Calcutta-born parents migrate to the United States immediately after their marriage. Their children who belong to the second generation American community, Gogol and Sonia grow up facing the interminable generational and cultural gap constantly finding themselves stuck between their parent's world and of theirs. Through the novel, Lahiri has attempted to force the two worlds she occupied to mingle on the page as she “was not brave enough or mature enough, to allow in life” (My Two Lives).

Jhumpa Lahiri's second generation expatriates suffer the crisis of identity and alienation when they are made to follow their Indian custom by their parents. The second generation Americans develops the same sense of belonging to America as shown by their parents to their motherland India. Hence life in a country like America not only gives the children a miserable plight when having to adapt to their parents' inherited culture but also lands them in profound anguish. For the first generation expatriates the acquired culture and adopted culture are two complementary poles harmonizing each other as long as they do not bother about assimilation of both cultures. The second generation Americans conversely faces the need to belong to the land of their birth and seldom want to stand out from the mainstream. The failure to create an understanding between the first and second generations only help to widen the gulf of disparity gearing the children up to estrange from their parents even before they realize it.

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The protagonist in *The Namesake*, Gogol is much troubled by the unusualness of his name neither being Indian nor American. He was named after his father's favourite Russian author Nikolai Gogol, but growing up in the Indian family in America he wants to cast off his name, which was neither Indian nor American. This predicament epitomizes the dilemma characterized by the diasporic community who cannot put themselves completely into the American culture nor come completely off the clutches of Indian culture. Their dream of assimilation thus becomes an unfulfilled one. They, in reality occupy the middle space or rather the third space – the in-between world – where both cultures intersect, harmonizing both becomes a wild goose chase.

Martin Heidegger in *Phenomenology and Existentialism* holds that the question "Who am I?" can be answered only through a decision as to what I intend to make of myself. Gogol but believes that the question "Who am I?" largely defines a name rather than one's essence or personality. Gogol tries to resolve his identity crisis by attempting to change his name to Nikhil, the very same name which his parents fail to implement while admitting him to school as his teacher choose to call him Gogol being that he only responded to the same. Gogol believes that it was his name that restrained him from being an American in every sense.

While he was Gogol, he always felt clung to his parents' Indian heritage – he felt more like an Indian than an American. But as Nikhil, his newly attained confidence seems to alter his personality and makes him feel even more free to mingle with the land of his birth. He no longer feels like an outsider as he sheds off his self-conscious attitude which otherwise would have always pricked him when he was Gogol. His self confidence and assertiveness braves him towards complete Americanization for which he grows a goatee, smokes Camel Lights, drinks liquor, loses virginity and falls in a short lived love affair. While enjoying freedom, he slowly gets estranged from his parents and merges up with the adopted culture. His determination to lead a life far removed from that of his parents only ends up in his discovery that the search for identity depends much more than a name.

Gogol exemplifies life of constant conflict between the inner and outer worlds. Feeling unfamiliar in one's surroundings is a constant situation for the existential hero, holds Indira Nityanandan in *Jhumpa Lahiri: A Tale of Diaspora*. Throughout the novel, Gogol is haunted by his name. His realization that he cannot get away from it even after changing his name throws him into bouts of anxiety and dilemma. His anguish, a result of existential crisis is not just his personal anguish but a universal one characterized by a sense of uneasiness which anyone in the world might feel. In his anguish he is unable to find out whether his choice was right or not and cannot bring himself out of this situation of choice making.

Indira Nityanandan argues that characters like Gogol are necessarily rooted in time and may often make the wrong choices only to initiate self discovery. In a life filled with anxiety, the existential hero swings between estrangement and reconciliation. Gogol tries his best to show off himself immensely like any other American through his adopted American lifestyle. On the contrary, like Sisyphus who is destined by the gods to push the stone up a hill and then let it roll down, he too finds it impossible to fully obliterate his parents' Indian culture. His father's untimely death results in his reconciliation with his parents' culture with which he realizes that identity is something more than a name. Nevertheless, the situation of Sisyphus forever rolling a stone up a hill is a perfect metaphor for the conditions of diasporic communities who in spite of recurrent attempts to assimilate the adopted culture fail downright only to find themselves pulled back by their inherited one.

The existentialists point out that one has to make a choice of which there is no clear guidance from the existing code of morality. While making the decision one would be completely alone with an open sky above, which shows him no hope destining him to continue the drudgery of his existence in complete isolation.

This is the tragedy of existential choice, for it is without any hope of a bright future that the individual has to choose, uncertain of the consequence opines Mrinal Kanti Bhadra in his *Critical Survey of Phenomenology and Existentialism*. Gogol as an existential hero has gone through a series of anxious moments in his life, even then he is not so desperate as to be unhappy with his life. Without allowing his heart to break or dwelling on his past experiences, he moves forward negating the absurdities of life. Truly he can be considered happy like Sisyphus by easily adapting to the life around him and providing a perfect example of the 'accultured alien' who makes the land of exile his homeland. Being a part of the American way of life, Gogol has been successful in creating a sense of belongingness in the land which is alien to his parents. With this he can move confidently creating his essence ignoring the absurdities of the world and thus defining his existence. He too, like Sisyphus, has no hope of deliverance and has remained satisfied with the physical effort needed to push the stone uphill.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that all is well . . . The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy (Camus 111).

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